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ABSTRACT

During the early 1980s, a number of commissions and special reports stated that education as it existed in the United States was in need of significant reform. The recommendations from these reports began to support "school effectiveness" research. Researchers charge that the basis for judging school effectiveness--student performance on norm-referenced standardized achievement tests--is extremely narrow, and advocate a more expansive definition. Additionally, although research clearly indicates the correlates of effective schools, it is unclear how schools become effective. This study sought to identify and analyze higher and lower performing elementary schools according to an enhanced definition of effectiveness. Analysis included the leadership, school culture, and instructional factors that contributed to school improvement in the higher performing schools. The investigation involved a multi-site ethnographic study of four (K-6) elementary schools in Connecticut's Educational Reference Group VI. Data were gathered from in-depth interviews and school documents which included strategic school profiles, curriculum guides, and district planning documents. Principals, central office administrators, and teachers were interviewed. The study considered the major themes that contribute to school improvement and concludes that leadership is one significant factor in creating higher performing schools. This leadership, however, emanates from a number of often-competing sources which include the school principal, the teaching staff, and the district central office. It is when the combination of sources coalesce around common goals that schools prosper at higher levels. The following questions are worth exploring in further research: (1) How do interpersonal skills impede or promote collaboration? (2) What strategies can be included in leader and teacher training programs to improve problem-solving and facilitation skills? (3) How can an improved understanding of successful principals and schools influence leadership training? and (4) How should staff development or graduate courses be designed to prepare future leaders with curriculum and instruction knowledge? (Contains 50 references.) (Author/BGC)

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A Qualitative Study of Higher and Lower Performing Elementary Schools

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Abstract

During the early 1980's a number of commissions and special reports stated that education as it existed in the United States was in need of significant reform (Duke, 1987). The recommendations from the reports began to support "school effectiveness" research. Since these initial recommendations, the definition of effectiveness has shifted significantly.

> The biggest shift is from an equity definition to a productivity definition of excellence which broadens the clientele to include all students, broadens the subject matter to be taught to include problem-solving and higher order thinking skills, and raises the criteria above those set for the equity definition. (Richards, 1991, p. 3)

Researchers charge that the basis for judging school effectiveness, student performance on norm-referenced standardized achievement tests, is extremely narrow; they advocate a more expansive definition (Duke, 1987; Lightfoot, 1983; Lipsitz, 1984; Rowan, Dwyer & Bossert, 1983; Sergiovanni, 1987). Additionally, although research clearly indicates the correlates of effective schools, what is unclear is how schools become effective.

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze higher and lower performing elementary schools according to an enhanced definition of effectiveness. Analysis included the leadership, school culture and instructional factors that contributed to school improvement in the higher performing schools.

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This investigation involved a multi-site ethnographic study of 4 (K-6) elementary schools in Connecticut's Educational Reference Group VI. The schools were identified by the Connecticut State Department of Education according to an expanded definition of effectiveness. The investigator was blind to the classification of the 4 schools. This analysis generated insights into the differences in curricula and instruction, school culture and leadership of the principal.

The preliminary conceptual framework for data analysis was an interactional matrix of change themes which highlight the conditions necessary for the creation of effective schools (David & Shields, 1991). Findings by site and across sites are supported by detailed descriptions and triangulation in addition to validation through member checks, peer debriefing, thick description, negative case analysis, prolonged engagement and journal entries.

This study considers the major themes that contribute to school improvement and concludes that leadership is one significant factor in creating higher performing schools. The leadership, however, emanates from a number of often competing sources which include the school principal, the teaching staff and the district central office. It is when the combination of sources coalesce around common goals and a mission that schools prosper powerfully and at higher levels.

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Introduction

During the early 1980's a number of commissions and special reports stated that education as it existed in the United States was in need of significant reform (Duke, 1987). What emerged from these reports was a consensus for change. This consensus for change, highlighted in *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, centered around the need for more active involvement of students in learning and higher expectations for teachers and students. These recommendations were significant in that they began to support the broad and rich "school effectiveness" research.

In Connecticut, schools have been involved in effectiveness programs on a voluntary basis since 1981. Using background research on effective schools from Edmonds (1979) and others (Brookover, 1982; Lezotte, 1980), Shoemaker (1989) defined an effective school in the *Connecticut School Effectiveness Report*:

> An effective school brings low income children to the mastery level which describes successful performance for middle income children and brings all children to a satisfactory level of achievement. Mastery is defined as competence in those skills necessary for success at the next grade level. (p. 1)

Richards (1991) refers to a significant shift in the way effectiveness is defined since the early effective schools movement. Different from earlier definitions, this enhanced definition considers school improvement, includes higher expectations for all students,

expands the subject matter, and raises the criteria above those set for the equity definition (p. 3). The public demands for increased accountability and higher expectations have led to the need for this enhanced definition of effectiveness. In *From Vision to Reality: When Schools Work, Connecticut Works*, a publication of the Connecticut Business for Education Coalition (May, 1992), this theme is reinforced consistently as evidenced in the following:

> If Connecticut is to achieve a world class education system by the year 2000, there must be fundamental changes in the ways students are taught and the environments in which educators are expected to perform their instructional responsibilities. CBEC has called for higher expectations for our students--and by extension, higher expectations for our educators and our schools. (p. 9)

Statement of the Problem

While existing research clearly indicates the correlates of effective schools, what is not clear is how schools become effective. Additionally, the basis for judging school effectiveness, student performance on standardized basic skills achievement tests, is extremely narrow (Duke, 1987). Researchers (Lightfoot, 1983; Lipsitz, 1984; Rowan, Dwyer & Bossert, 1983; Sergiovanni, 1987) criticize the narrow definition of school effectiveness and argue for a more expansive and multidimensional definition.

Since a number of researchers (Lightfoot, 1983; Lipsitz, 1984; Rowan, Dwyer & Bossert, 1983; and Sergiovanni, 1987) addressed a need for an expanded definition of effectiveness, for the purpose of this study a new definition is needed to summarize the shift to include productivity as well as equity. In this study the following

second-generation definition culled from the research literature (Shoemaker, 1991; Richards, 1991) will be used:

> A higher performing school is successful in bringing a majority of students to achievement levels which are at or above the mastery level (state goal) in reading and mathematics on the Connecticut Mastery Test regardless of socioeconomic status. Mastery is defined as competence in learning challenging content and complex problem-solving skills necessary for success at the next grade level.

This enhanced definition uses a criterion-referenced mastery test that has been developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education, instead of the standardized norm-referenced tests utilized in the earlier studies. When the criterion-referenced tests were developed, the original state standard was a remedial level equating to the minimum mastery level described by Edmonds. Presently, a high proportion of students in the sample schools are meeting the remedial standard. As a result, schools are striving to reach beyond the initial standard to the higher standard described as the state mastery goal. Students who score at or above the state goal have demonstrated superior performance on the skills, processes and knowledge associated with the particular content area. The second-generation definition of effectiveness is accepted in this study as a starting point in an attempt to develop a broader definition of effectiveness. Additionally, although researchers argue for expanded definitions of effectiveness and measurement (e.g. portfolio ratings, exhibitions and laboratory ratings, etc.), these recommended measures were not considered as selection criteria for the schools in this study. However, they were considered

during data collection for possible consideration in the enhanced definition of effectiveness.

Thus, because it is unclear how to change ineffective schools into effective ones, the problem this study investigated was how schools improve by analyzing differences and providing thick descriptions of higher and lower performing schools. Specifically, the study involves investigation of previous practices and provides descriptions of current practices in three areas: curricula and instruction, school culture, and the role of the principal in improving schools that establish higher expectations and learning for all students. During data collection the researcher explored and generated rich descriptions and possible explanations for higher performance.

Background of the Study

Two factors define the problem--the narrow definition used as a basis for judging school effectiveness and the leadership of the principal in shaping a school culture which promotes improvement and higher norms of performance.

The Meaning of School Effectiveness

The effective schools literature took a partisan position by promoting a specific, narrow definition. While Edmonds' (1979) definition was not the only definition of effectiveness, it highlighted the main themes with an emphasis on specific literacy and numeracy outcomes (Firestone, 1991). These themes established a comparative criterion and a stress on education of the poor that make the

effectiveness definition one of equity.

As Richards (1991) and others point out, there are various problems with the definitions employed by effective schools writers. Firestone (1991) and others (Duke, 1987; Lightfoot, 1983; Lipsitz, 1984; Rowan, Dwyer & Bossert, 1983; Sergiovanni, 1987) criticize this narrow definition of effectiveness and assert that depending upon how these standards are set, students who meet them could still be unprepared for life in the adult world. Richards (1991) refers to a significant shift in the way effectiveness has been defined since the early effective schools movement. He (1991) enhanced the equity definition so that it considers school improvement and "broadens the clientele to include all students, broadens the subject matter to be taught to include problem-solving and higher order thinking skills, and raises the criteria above those set for the equity definition" (p. 3).

Edmonds introduced the method of disaggregating data by social class subgroups as the most compelling impetus for change. The Connecticut school improvement project supported this methodology in that it "recommends the disaggregation of achievement data by social class on the basis of percentile ranks and identifies the 30th percentile as the criterion for minimum mastery on a norm referenced standardized test of achievement" (Connecticut State Department of Education, Draft, "The Connecticut School Effectiveness Project: Development and Assessment", 1981, p. 19-20). Pecheone and Shoemaker (1982) emphasized the fact that the Connecticut guidelines exclude longitudinal data. Meyers (1984) cites the Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore,

Ouston and Smith (1979) study as an example of one longitudinal process: "...they used the longitudinal approach, studying their schools over a period of five years rather than taking a snapshot of effectiveness at a single point in time. If variables remain important and associated with outcomes over time, they will provide more credence to those thinking about creating them in their own schools" (p. 19). Therefore, the schools in this study were considered increasingly effective if they demonstrated over a three year period that there was an increase in achievement in low income and other populations.

Given the research by David and Shields (1991), major themes emerge from the broad literature base which highlight the conditions necessary for the creation of effective schools. The themes include leadership and management, changing school culture and implementing challenging curricula and instruction.

Leadership and Management

Although various leadership styles have been promoted for decades, in recent years researchers have attempted to link school leadership to effectiveness indicators (Duke, 1987; Kroeze, 1984; Shoemaker and Fraser, 1981; Sweeney, 1982). Original reports merely declared that leadership was a factor to be studied in explaining variations in student achievement among schools. Recent efforts have been directed at specifying more accurately how leaders in effective schools actually affect the quality of teaching and learning. These research efforts make it conceivable to define a set of vital leadership functions

associated with good instruction (Duke, 1987).

Duke (1987) speaks to the number of early school effectiveness studies which emphasize certain common attributes of school instructional leadership. Kroeze (1984), Shoemaker and Fraser (1981) and Sweeney (1982) support the characteristics of assertive, achievement-oriented leadership; coordination of instructional programs and monitoring of student progress; and an orderly, purposeful school climate.

Duke (1987) indicates that generalizations should be made with caution since it is uncertain to what extent the findings can be applied to secondary schools or even to suburban elementary schools. Lastly, as Rowan, Dwyer and Bossert (1983) indicate, none of the studies directly addresses causation. Therefore, it cannot be established that the principal leadership characteristics as summarized by Kroeze (1984), Shoemaker and Frazer (1981), and Sweeney (1982) have created effective schools or been created by them. Although there are concerns relative to making generalizations, the original school effectiveness research strongly implies that leadership was one significant factor in the quality of instruction.

School Improvement and Changing School Culture

The comprehensive research on school change and school improvement has been vital in reinforcing the core research and in continuing the expansion of the effective schools research model for school improvement (Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1984; Fullan, 1982, 1985). Although support is strong, the effective schools' correlates provide only the

foundation for school success (Peterson & Lezotte, 1991). A number of different understandings have been added to expand and strengthen the effective schools practice. Peterson & Lezotte (1991), suggest that the most significant shift in the effective schools movement has been the increased evidence of elaborate school and district improvement efforts. Additionally, the shift includes the district's commitment to a collaborative process that gives substantial authority to the schools' faculty and administration to foster change (Peterson & Lezotte, 1991).

Organizational culture has been an important area that has been incorporated into the research on effective schools (Deal, 1985; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Deal & Peterson, 1990). It is evident that the underlying norms, values, and beliefs held by administrators and teachers are critical components of school improvement and effective schools. As Little (1982) espouses, norms of performance and improvement, and beliefs that all children can learn, are key elements in establishing a school culture that supports the kinds of work environments found in the early research.

Challenging Curricula and Instruction

The ultimate goal of school improvement is to increase learning for all students. For this to occur, curricula and instruction must change significantly. Recent attempts have emphasized the creation of stimulating environments and the use of challenging materials necessary to engage students in learning. High expectations for student learning and challenging curricula are "particularly salient when students come

from minority cultures with norms that clash with the predominant culture--norms that teachers can misrepresent as students' lack of ability or interest" (David & Shields, 1991, p. 17). In successful schools, teachers and administrators believe that all students can learn, and expectations are high.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify higher performing schools according to an enhanced definition of effectiveness. An analysis of the complex dynamics associated with the higher performing schools and how they differ from the lower performing schools was conducted.

The following research questions were investigated:

1. According to the second-generation definition of effective elementary schools, what roles do principals play in the schools that have been identified as higher performing for all students and how do these roles differ from the lower performing schools?

2. According to the second-generation definition of effective elementary schools, what are the characteristics of the school culture in the higher performing schools and how do they differ from the lower performing schools?

3. According to the second-generation definition of effective elementary schools, what changes in curricula and instruction have occurred in higher performing schools and how do they differ from the lower performing schools?

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Methods and Procedures

Due to the nature of the questions in this study, a qualitative design was used. This investigation generated four case studies of higher and lower performing schools. This method was selected because of the most recent effective schools literature review by David and Shields (1991), which indicates:

> The concomitant shift in methodology from large-scale, survey-based, quantitative studies to case studies of a few sites provided a much deeper understanding of the processes of transforming schools (Greene & David, 1984). Consequently, the knowledge base moved from being primarily descriptive to a much richer set of understandings about how and why change did or did not occur. (p.9)

Site Selection

Schools selected for this study were chosen from Connecticut's Education Reference Group VI. This ERG category was chosen because it contains a preponderance of schools meeting the enhanced definition for effective schools used in this study. First, the Connecticut State Department of Education Bureau of Research and Teacher Assessment sampled all K-6 elementary schools in ERG VI selecting those who had the highest poverty level. The bureau selected a district from ERG VI with subsequent identification of four K-6 elementary schools through purposeful sampling. According to Patton (1990), the point of purposeful sampling is to understand cases that are likely to be information-rich. "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of

the research" (Patton, p.169). The strategy used in this study was to select purposeful samples by examining critical cases. "Critical cases are those that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things" (Patton, p.174).

According to the Strategic School District Profile (1991-92), there are thirteen schools in this mid-sized city: nine K-6 elementary schools, a 7-8 middle school, a 9-12 high school as well as a K-12 special education program and a 9-12 alternative high school. The district enrolled 6004 children: 34% minority and 23% receiving free/reduced price meals. The four schools selected for this study were similar in socioeconomic status, racial composition and percentage of students whose home language is not English (Appendix). Additionally, because this study examined change over time, only schools where the principal had been serving in a leadership role for a minimum of two years were selected. The four schools were matched for higher and lower performance with the two outliers on each end of the continuum being selected. These cases added important qualitative information to the study and provided data for program and school improvement. The investigator conducted an in-depth study at each site while blind to the classification of the schools. This analysis generated insights into the differences in curricula and instruction, school culture and leadership.

Access, Entry,and Confidentiality

Following selection of the schools according to the established

criteria, a letter was mailed to the superintendent discussing the details of the study. The letter, signed by the researcher, comprised the initial access instrument. A feasibility analysis was conducted through interviews that focused on the investigator's access to the schools, staff and documentation, as well as reciprocity of terms (Patton, 1990) and ethical issues, including confidentiality of data.

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered from in-depth interviews and school documents which included strategic school profiles, curriculum guides, and the district planning documents. Principals, central office administrators and a minimum of three teachers per building were interviewed. Interview guide questions for teachers and principals were developed from three major areas of investigation: leadership, school culture, curricula and instruction. These areas were derived from the most recent effective schools research in a review of literature by David & Shields (1991). The questions were based on a preliminary conceptual framework which explores previous practices, current priorities and future goals. The interview guides were piloted with a practicing principal and a teacher.

Data Analysis

Initial coding of data was followed by focused coding (Glaser, 1967). As categories and themes emerged from the focused coding, knowledge of the literature was used to clarify and expand codes as well as to become sensitized to the emerging analysis. Memos, written elaborations of ideas about the data, and the coded categories (Charmaz,

1983) were sorted and integrated in order to reveal any relation among categories. Data collection ended when the researcher achieved data saturation which is the point when information becomes redundant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A qualitative data management program, QUALPRO (1993), was used to identify, code and cluster principal leadership behaviors, changes in curricula and instruction, and characteristics of school culture during the school improvement process in each site and differences across sites. All interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and subsequently coded through the use of themes derived from families of coding themes as described by Bogdan and Biklin (1982).

Once interviews were transcribed verbatim, a file card system was devised to further sort and analyze the data. Interviews were sorted by the coding themes and printed on hard copy. The transcriptions were separated and organized on file cards according to school, interviewee and coding category. This method enabled a systematic rereading and a more focused coding of relevant supporting data within the transcripts. First, each school was analyzed separately for evolving themes within the schools. Then, the analysis continued to explore common themes across schools. This analysis would serve to confirm the initial selection of the higher and lower performing schools. Finally, a peer reviewer confirmed the selection of the higher and lower performing schools.

The investigator conducted member checks, kept a reflexive journal,

engaged a peer debriefer, and used thick description and negative case analysis to strengthen the investigation's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Upon conclusion of the data analysis, the researcher identified the higher performing schools as Clay and Wheatley. Subsequently, the Education Department officials confirmed the classification of each school. Additionally, the first level of analysis included visual graphic representations confirming the higher and lower performing schools. The visual graphic displays and summary tables (Appendix) depict achievement trends according to the percent of students at or above the state goal in reading and mathematics on the mastery test. The average reading score and the average number of mathematics objectives mastered are displayed for each school. Follow up statistical analyses under consideration include analysis of variance, chi-square test and disaggregation of test scores by race, socioeconomic status and gender. These components allow the researcher to confirm the relationship between the quantitative aspect of the schools' performance and the qualitative conclusions of the study.

Findings

First, the findings of this study are summarized by returning to a discussion of each research question. Next, the findings for each research question are highlighted for the schools identifying common themes and differences among the schools. Finally, salient points synthesized from the data analysis are presented with implications for practice and further study.

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Summary of the Findings

Leadership and Management

The first research question investigated the roles of the principals in the higher performing schools and how their roles differed from the lower performing schools. Salient findings are summarized.

Emerson and Palmer Schools

Although there is an established strategic plan for the district which incorporates participatory management and school-based decision making teams, the principals at Emerson and Palmer did not take advantage of the leadership structure to stimulate formal discussions relative to academic learning issues. In fact, the principal at Emerson indicated that "the decision making team is not the major area for problem-solving. A lot of it [problem-solving] is just done in dialogue between myself and individual teachers (35.414-416)." Although the principal at Emerson spoke of the lack of time as an impediment to change, he neglected to search for any creative ways for staff to collaborate. Further, the principal at Palmer indicated that it was difficult for teachers to learn how to work as a team and make decisions by consensus. There was an absence of any discussion by these principals that represented the leadership skills necessary to build a shared sense of mission and culture. Therefore, it was clear that they did not take advantage of the decision making team to build shared culture in their respective schools.

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Wheatley and Clay Schools

The language arts consultant at Wheatley referred to the former principal, who was currently the assistant superintendent, as providing the impetus for improving curriculum and instruction in the school. She indicated:

> ...changes had been done in a very orderly and systematic way and to me his vision and foresight is truly phenomenal. I've never seen anyone who has it as he does. And he's been able to effect so much change (2.62-70).

The sixth grade teacher concurred:

> In essence, the man is a visionary. He's a wonderful listener and he processes what people say and he does very good in terms of giving direction. So, in essence, what he has done is that focus that he gave to the school, he has now in his new capacity, given to the town. And there's an awful lot of things happening that he has been the catalyst for (15.130-136).

The current principal had been at Clay for two years and expanded upon the structure which had been established prior to his appointment. The decision making team in this school had functioned as the language arts team, and he expanded its responsibilities as a curriculum team. He spoke highly of the exceptional quality of the staff at Clay and their ability to work well together. He spoke of many of the staff members as assuming leadership roles in the school. In particular the staff members interviewed in this study were described as "...energetic. They have a lot of credibility with staff" (41.293-295). Furthermore, he was complimentary of the staff and their recognition of the need to be held accountable and constantly question the status quo. They were

described as a staff that continually challenged itself to new levels of thinking by engaging in the self-referential exercises that Margaret Wheatley (1992) described as "equilibrium busting". The current principal and key informants referred to the previous principal as influential in creating a school culture where teachers felt they could take risks (77.695-703). The principal indicated that he would continue to support the risk taking nature that was present within Clay School and did not anticipate changing the communication structure of the school. The language arts consultant felt that Clay School had made progress more quickly than the other schools in the district (126.730-731). She attributed the advancement to the teachers and their leadership (129.737).

In contrast to the lower performing schools, the leadership in the higher performing schools emanated from a number of often competing sources which included the school principal, the teaching staff and the district office. The principals in these schools made a concerted effort to focus their decision making team meetings on curricular and instructional issues and depended on the district office to provide support for school improvement. It was when the combination of sources coalesced around common goals and a mission that the schools prospered powerfully and at higher levels. The influence of the district office is discussed in a separate section as an emerging theme contributing to improvement in the higher performing schools.

School Improvement and Changing School Culture

The second research question investigated the characteristics of

school culture in the higher performing schools and how they differed from the lower performing schools. Salient findings from each school are summarized. Additionally, an emerging theme of parent involvement is discussed.

Emerson School

In Emerson School, it was clear that there was a lack of commitment to building a shared sense of mission and culture. Within the discussion on school leadership, the relationship between the decision making team and the principal was explored. The transcripts highlight the absence of attempts on the part of the principal or decision making team to establish an instructional focus. In point of fact, the staff at Emerson rarely addressed curricular and instructional issues as part of the decision making team agenda. The lack of instructional focus was communicated by one staff member who indicated:

> I find that our decision making team is very slow in making worthwhile decisions and they tend to focus on the...problems that don't seem important to me...I would like to see more of the curriculum problems being brought up to the team...(41.247-253).

As elaborated in the review of research, it is evident that the underlying norms, values, and beliefs held by administrators and teachers are critical components of school improvement and effective schools. The underlying norms, values and beliefs of the Emerson School community did not emerge from the data. The teachers who were interviewed did not embrace the expectation that all children can learn to high levels. This is evidenced by the reading consultant who

discussed the reading comprehension scores on the Mastery Test as being "low because they [the students] truly don't understand a tremendous amount of the words that are in those stories (61.683-685)". She continued to emphasize:

> ...the state needs to realize that there are some of us that are never going to make or reach those standards until something out there changes for us. The social problem that exists has got to change in order for us to do what they want us to do (69.773-780).

Palmer School

The principal of Palmer School spoke highly of the decision making team and indicated, "the decision making team plays a large part in the focus and the vision of what we're doing. And they meet every Tuesday morning...do everything from budgeting and hiring to scheduling (5.100-104)." In contrast, while discussing the major accomplishments of the decision making team, the grade four teacher admitted:

> Nothing major or broad...But I can't say as a team we've brought about this huge, incredible...we've talked about discipline and some of the things we could do as a school to implement or make changes but in terms of a real major issue, I think our team focuses on...the problems that might arise, whatever they may be (42.274-282).

The other informants concurred with her comment in that they could not recall anything significant that had come about of a curricular nature as a result of the decision making team. Although the staff felt that discipline was important to them, they were equally attentive to the importance of curriculum. This evolved as an area of concern as the

fourth grade teacher explained that they really did not have the opportunity to discuss curricular and instructional issues. She elaborated:

> I mean, we have different lunch schedules, so it's even hard to chit-chat around lunch. You're always on the run and you've got your half-an-hour during the day to get whatever is done that needs to be done and you don't have that real opportunity to sit and share. And I'm talking a good half-an-hour or forty-five minutes on a scheduled basis (9.104-110).

Clay School

During the interviews at Clay School, each staff member spoke extensively relative to the numerous mechanisms established to enhance communication within the building and throughout the district. They commented about the formal and informal mechanisms used to solve problems in this school. Although, staff indicated that they did not have a great amount of common planning time, they had a number of meetings that served to enhance communication and problem solving. Additionally, the principal had a representative group of teachers who planned to work on the schedule in the summer to explore possibilities for establishing common planning time.

The language arts consultant at Clay spoke of her involvement with coordinating the language arts team meetings and how she represented the school during the district reading department meetings. She added that the organizational structure evolved within the school with the former principal and that the current principal continued to support the structure. She thought, "It was a real valuable thing for a school to

have (87.459-463)."

The second grade teacher at Clay shared the concerns and expectations of the staff when she commented:

> ...children come to school with minimal experiential background. They do seem to come without a lot of prior knowledge on a lot of things. All of that concerns us but it doesn't seem to lower our expectations for them...Because there has been too much evidence that kids can learn. There's a pretty good attitude here about helping all kids and a place for all kids. And kids believe in themselves, too (70.723-733).

Wheatley School

The principal at Wheatley was in his second year at the school and had commented that the decision making team was in transition and that he had added a parent to the team. He indicated that the parent representative had helped to focus the discussions on instructional issues within the school. Further, key informants elaborated about the dedication on the part of the staff and the strong academic curriculum and expectations. For example, the language arts consultant supported the discussions about expectations with the following statement:

> ...the staff had ambitious academic expectations for every child. I mean they really are dedicated and I've serviced many schools in town and I feel this staff is unusually academically ambitious for children. They are and they're conscious of test scores, and they want those scores up there" (6.177-185).

In contrast to the themes that centered around lack of underlying norms, values, and beliefs that all children can learn to high levels in the lower performing schools (Emerson and Palmer), the higher performing schools (Clay and Wheatley) revealed cultures that embraced the

expectation that all children can learn to high levels. Furthermore, significant evidence in the higher performing schools pointed to staffs and a principal that collaborated and focused on instructional improvement in their respective schools.

Parental Involvement

Edmonds (1979) perceived the involvement of parents as beyond the control of schools. His opposition to defining it as a critical factor was an effort to focus effective schools research and practice on those factors that school could impact. Although parental involvement was originally not one of the correlates of effectiveness, current programs define parents as essential participants.

According to the principal at Emerson, there was an increase in involvement by parents during the last three to four years. The examples he cited (running the school store and book fairs) are all from one of the five types of parent involvement (Epstein, 1992) as discussed in Multiculturalism and TQE: Cultural diversity in schools (Cordeiro, Reagan, and Martinez, 1994). This category is described as *volunteering* and includes parents as volunteers in the classroom or other areas of the school. Staff indicated that individual teachers made attempts to involve parents to a greater extent but activities were not formerly organized.

The principal at Palmer indicated that she had offered workshops for parents on the Mastery Tests and on curriculum related issues. Additionally, she had monthly coffee hours and created a curriculum

library for parents. These examples point to the minor attempts at increasing parent involvement in a category referred to as *helping families assist children outside school* (Cordeiro, Reagan, and Martinez, 1994). All informants commented that parental involvement had declined at the school and attributed this to the increase in parents who were working two jobs to make ends meet. One teacher believed that more outreach was necessary and that teachers were very concerned about the lack of parental involvement.

The principal at Wheatley indicated that there were many parents who were active and that he had encouraged others to become involved as *volunteers*. As in the other schools, there was no formal mechanism for involving parents although he had included parents on the decision making team for the first time that year.

The principal and other informants at Clay indicated that staff members "were constantly trying to involve parents in the educational process (3.33-38)." Parent involvement was a great concern at Clay prior to the current principal's appointment. In the past they offered family math and reading nights, and the entire staff attended. Although they did not have a formal plan for involving parents in the school, the principal shared the results of the data collected during the recent survey conducted by the Office of Urban and Priority School Districts. Furthermore, the staff had analyzed the report and were determining priorities for planning. As indicated in the findings from the recent survey, a more coordinated schoolwide outreach plan needed to be formulated and agreed to by the staff. This school was involved in the

planning process that begins with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and consensus on the directions necessary to promote improvement (Epstein, 1992).

In summary, all four schools in this study showed evidence of parent involvement of a varying nature. However, the two higher performing schools agreed that parents needed to be involved to a greater extent and had taken initial steps in this direction. Wheatley had included a parent representative on the decision making team for the first time and Clay had analyzed their parent involvement activities. Additionally, the Clay staff was in the process of developing an action plan to address this particular concern.

In contrast, the lower performing schools, showed some evidence of addressing the basic obligations of parents in the schools but had not made deliberate plans to include parents at more meaningful levels. In fact, teachers at Palmer indicated a concern that parent involvement in the school had decreased and discussions had not taken place to address this concern.

Curricula and Instruction

The third research question addressed the changes in curricula and instruction that occurred in the higher performing schools and how they differed from the lower performing schools. A summary, in addition to an analysis of the higher performing schools' efforts, is offered.

Clay School

In discussing curricula and instruction at Clay School, all staff

members pointed to the development of integrated thematic units and the heterogeneous grouping that occurred beginning in kindergarten. They discussed the common learning outcomes that were in place for all children regardless of race or socioeconomic status. The teachers spoke of the emphasis they placed on the primary grades and their struggles with eliminating "pull outs" and searching for alternatives. They acknowledged the considerable change within the school during the past six years and attributed this to the planning they had undertaken during their study group experience with the former principal.

The language arts consultant agreed that the mastery test was reflective of what we want children to know and be able to do. She added:

> I think the state has sort of led the kind of instruction they want us to have by the kind of tests they've given. Like the writing prompt and the Degrees of Reading Power and the emphasis on graphic organizers and summarization (35.193-199). I think it's good and I think it had a good impact. I know initially there was quite a bit of resistance about the test...I think most teachers are indicating that it is reflective of what we really want kids to know (36.201-204).

Finally, the teachers and the principal indicated that mathematics would be the next area of focus for the school.

Wheatley School

In discussing curricula and instruction, the principal at Wheatley was enthusiastic about the language arts curriculum and instructional strategies and felt considerable progress had been made in this area. Further, he was positive about the development of integrated units that

had occurred. Additionally, "the reading of good literature has really made an impact. They were really seeing the results of that. Kids were enjoying more learning and reading" (42.269). Finally, he indicated that mathematics remained an area of weakness.

At Wheatley, the grouping practices appeared inconsistent throughout the intermediate grades but classes were heterogeneously grouped at the primary level. In addition to the absence of any remedial programs, the language arts consultant indicated the new reading series was designed to be used by a heterogeneously grouped class. "They are all reading the anthology as a class. There has to be small group instruction because needs have to be met. So there is a need for that daily small group instruction" (9.386-397). The instructional strategies varied throughout and the sixth grade teacher indicated that they were changing during the past five years. Finally, cooperative learning strategies were being used to a greater extent than in the past.

Teachers in the higher performing schools, Clay and Wheatley, developed integrated units, immersed students in reading high quality literature and refined their instruction to incorporate metacognitive strategies. These strategies were designed for children to control, monitor and improve their learning. Finally, classes were arranged to maximize the benefits of a variety of instructional strategies (e.g., cooperative learning, small group instruction, reciprocal teaching and individual assistance).

In contrast, there was an absence of discussion or consensus on issues related to curriculum and instruction in the lower performing schools. When discussion occurred, the impetus originated from the central office as opposed to the collaboration among staff that was evident in the higher performing schools. Thus, the district influence that evolved as a theme is discussed in the following section.

District Influence and Process Issues

As indicated above, one theme that emerged from the data analysis was the influence of the district's central office. The strategic planning process undertaken in 1990 culminated in a five year plan that recommended an interdisciplinary curriculum and a systematic professional development program. One principal stated that if a school wanted to implement a program that was not included within the strategic plan, they had to appeal to the superintendent. Although site-based management was mandated as a component of the strategic plan, its implementation was inconsistent across schools.

The language arts focus was an area that was introduced by the district central office prior to the strategic planning as a result of the successes realized at Clay School. The former principal of Clay referred to the district focus as emanating from Clay and having a major influence on the strategic planning process. The current principal reinforced the origination of the language arts focus. The language arts consultant at Clay discussed the former principal, currently district language arts supervisor, and her impact upon the school. She described her as:

> ...pretty forward thinking. So, this school began doing things on its own before the other schools were even thinking about it. And we had sort of a study team. It was pretty interesting to decide how we wanted to change things within this school...And we would each read and then we'd bring things to report to the group. So, we're used to working together. (19.110-122).

Additionally, she indicated that the study teams had been replaced by the language arts team in her school. She credited the former principal with establishing the foundation for school improvement and teacher collaboration through the study team concept.

Teachers in the higher performing schools supported the district focus of "Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum." One fourth grade teacher at Palmer described the changes over the past few years as vast and "phenomenal". "And I think that has made a really incredible impact on the instruction that goes on in the classroom and how to approach it. Those have probably been the biggest changes" (17.156-159). The Clay language arts consultant indicated that there was district wide resistance to the changes but there were no obstacles at Clay. Teachers at Clay had been the leaders and moved forward more quickly than the others. Additionally, the teachers at Wheatley were willing to move forward and embraced the literacy expectations for all students. Their willingness to move forward in the area of higher literacy expectations was nurtured by the trust and the school culture that had evolved through the leadership of the former principal at Wheatley (currently the assistant superintendent).

Running head: SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

The current principal at Wheatley lacked a strong foundation in academic curriculum and readily subscribed to the district vision for literacy achievement. He indicated:

> At this point, I feel strongly that the curriculum is being driven by our central team and it is being driven by our department heads and our assistant superintendent in charge of instruction. I don't see that I'm the primary mover of it. I may be a facilitator to help it happen but it's really being driven from the top. (22.147-150).

The language arts consultant at Wheatley reinforced the perception of the current principal and emphasized the importance of the district language arts supervisor (former principal of Clay) and her accessibility to staff.

Discussion

The representatives of the State Department of Education confirmed the researcher's identification of the higher and lower performing elementary schools subsequent to the completion of the school level and central office data analysis. The first research question investigated the roles of the principals and how their roles differed among schools. Although the district had a strategic plan that incorporated participatory management and decision making teams, the principals at Emerson and Palmer did not take advantage of the leadership structure to stimulate discussion relative to improvement in student achievement. Supporting this observation is a review of research (Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz, 1990), discussed in The Kentucky Education Reform (Steffy, 1993), which determined the relationship between school-based decision making

and improved student achievement as described, "The issues councils tended to deal with were not directly related to instructional issues, but were more focused on facility concerns, student discipline and fundraising" (p. 88). As described in the review of research, this study clearly depicts principals who did not demonstrate the leadership necessary to build a shared sense of mission and culture in their schools.

In contrast, the higher performing schools, Wheatley and Clay had principals who played active roles as transformational leaders in their schools and the district. According to Burns (1978),

> The premise of this leadership is that, whatever the separate interests persons might hold, they are presently or potentially united in the pursuit of higher goals, the realization of which is tested by the achievement of significant change that represents the collective or pooled interests of leaders and followers. (p.425-426)

The leadership in these schools was transformational in that it emanated from a variety of often competing sources which included the staff, the principal and the district office. As described by Louis (1989) the higher performing schools produced a picture of "co-management, with coordination and joint planning enhanced through the development of consensus among staff members at all levels about desired goals of education" (p. 161). As Louis (1989) examined school-district relationships as described in Fullan (1991), "she found there were two separate dimensions that affected the quality of the relationship. One she called the degree of "engagement" (frequent

interaction and communication, mutual coordination and influence, some shared goals and objectives); the other she classified as the level of "bureaucratization" (the presence of extensive rules and regulations governing the relationship)" (p. 204).

The higher performing schools in this study experienced high engagement and low bureaucratic scenarios. The research by Louis (1989) supports the premise that this school-district relationship presented "the only clearly positive district contexts" (p.161). In Fullan (1991), Purkey and Smith made a variety of policy recommendations for districts engaged in a serious effort at school reform. They observe:

> ...efforts to change schools have been productive and most enduring when directed toward influencing the entire school culture via a strategy involving collaborative planning, shared decision making, and collegial work in an atmosphere friendly to experimentation and evaluation. (p.357)

Therefore, although the school is the unit of change, it cannot accomplish high levels of improved student learning without the support of the district office. In the lower performing schools, the interaction with the district office was unclear and the school principal did not take advantage of the apparent district level support. Clearly, the improvement process evidenced in the higher performing schools operated within a balance of interactions between the school and district office.

Research question number two investigated the characteristics of the school culture in the higher performing schools and how they

differed from the lower performing schools. The lower performing schools, Emerson and Palmer, revealed an absence of a school culture that embraced collaboration and a focus on school improvement designed to examine curricular and instructional issues. Informants did not embrace the philosophy that all children can learn to high levels. Additionally, the underlying norms, values and beliefs held by teachers and administrators within the school communities were unclear.

In contrast, the higher performing schools, Clay and Wheatley, had teachers and principals who spoke extensively regarding the numerous formal and informal mechanisms established to enhance communication within the building and throughout the district. They valued communication and the need for common planning time and spoke freely of their struggles with arranging structures for communication. While the lower performing schools lacked a sense of shared mission, the higher performing schools revealed cultures that embraced the expectation that all children can learn to high levels.

The final question in this study investigated the changes in curricula and instruction that have occurred in the higher performing schools and how they differed from the lower performing schools. While teachers in the higher performing schools embraced the notion that all children can learn to high levels, they were proactive in their quest to realize this vision. Their focused communication on instructional issues balanced routine skill learning with more challenging complex tasks beginning in the primary grades. The teachers interviewed in the

higher performing schools sought to actively engage students and supported their transition toward independent learning. The staff in the higher performing schools had high expectations for student learning which were often communicated by grouping practices. They explored a variety of grouping practices and subscribed to flexible assignment to groups. These strategies were not implemented in isolation from one another. Rather, coordination occurred across classrooms and grades in an attempt to reduce fragmentation of curricula and instruction. Professional development in the district was designed to support the challenging curricula and instruction subscribed to within the district. The higher performing schools were more proactive in securing professional development opportunities and went beyond those offered by the district.

The final finding that emerged from data collection is that the association between students' home lives and schooling has evolved as an important aspect of school culture. As early as 1979, Brookover and Lezotte supported further research in this area when they suggested a lack of clarity in the differences of parent involvement in the improving and declining schools. They elaborated:

> It seems there is less overall parent involvement in the improving schools; however, the improving school staffs indicated that their schools have higher levels of *parent initiated* involvement. This suggests that we need to look more closely at the nature of involvement exercised by parents. (p. 19)

Epstein (1990) identified five categories of involving parents that form a comprehensive program with three overriding goals:

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* the improvement of school programs, classroom management, and teacher effectiveness,
* the improvement of student learning and development,
* the improvement of parents' awareness of their continuing responsibilities and contributions to their children's education and social and personal development across the school years. (p.59)

Additionally, a limited but developing body of literature suggests a substantial return when the cultural disparities between the home and the school are bridged. These cultural disparities are typical of low-income communities (Shields, 1991; Cordeiro, Reagan & Martinez, 1994). Efforts to change this mismatch include involving parents and the community--educating both cultures about each other (Comer, 1988; Committee on Policy for Racial Justice, 1989).

Limitations and Implications

Limitations

Qualitative researchers are concerned with trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness refers to issues of credibility (truth value or internal validity), transferability (generalizability or external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (bias).

Although an attempt was made to address issues of credibility, dependability and confirmability through triangulation of data, trustworthiness is compromised by the inexperience of the investigator and limited resources. If experience, time and financial resources were

abundant, a longer study with a larger sample would offer a more detailed, refined description of school culture, curricula and instruction and the principal's role in school improvement.

Finally, the mastery test has not changed significantly since its inception and this increases the validity of the instrument. The threat to the internal validity of the study may be confounded by the mortality of the student population.

Although attempts were made to control for experimenter bias by conducting a blind investigation and including thick description in the case studies, the findings are only transferable to elementary schools whose background characteristics are similar to schools in Educational Reference Group VI.

Implications for the Practice of Administrators

This study points to the need to question current leadership practices and how principals make decisions about and articulate the needs of their schools. The research base and knowledge of instruction is available to teach students effectively so that all students learn. We know that school culture is an important component of school success. Principals can make efforts to improve staff collaborative and problem solving skills. Strengthening in these areas promotes the development of a school culture where participants are constantly dedicated to continuous improvement, or what the Japanese call *kaizen* (Bonstingl, 1992). Further, we know that study teams and curriculum integration can be powerful strategies for staff collaboration and delivery of instruction (Jacobs, 1992; Bruce, Wolf & Calhoun, 1993). Educational

leaders need to continue to explore the future potential of these vehicles.

Finally, parent involvement surfaced as a significant partner necessary for the advancement of student achievement for all students. In the higher performing schools, parent involvement activities were identified as a need but had not been a major focus. It is recommended that principals make parent involvement a priority for their schools.

Implications for Future Research

This study suggests that there are numerous directions for additional research in the area of leadership, school culture and curriculum and instruction. Given what we know about the importance of collaboration, the following questions are worth exploring: How do interpersonal skills impede or promote collaboration? What strategies can we include in our leadership and teacher training programs to improve problem-solving and facilitation skills? What methods can be used to assess collaborative skills? How can an improved understanding of successful principals and schools influence leadership training? How should we design staff development or graduate courses for our future leaders to prepare them for the knowledge of curriculum and instruction necessary to support staff? Further investigation of these questions will refine the understanding of successful leaders and their complex interactions with staff as a critical component in school improvement efforts.

	DISTRICT	STATE	SCHOOLS			
			CLAY	WHEATLEY	EMERSON	PALMER
% STABILITY	80.0	84.1	84.2	82.2	56.2	76.8
% ESL	13.1	11.3	15.7	9.9	13.7	16.7
% POVERTY	25.6	24.4	38.7	11.1	40.4	34.7
% MINORITY	33.1	—	39.8	33.9	39.8	45.3

READING ACHIEVEMENT

AVERAGE
DEGREES OF READING POWER

	90 - 91	91 - 92	92 - 93
Grade 6	N	N	Y
Grade 4	Y	Y	Y

PERCENT
AT OR ABOVE STATE GOAL

	90 - 91	91 - 92	92 - 93
Grade 6	N	N	Y
Grade 4	Y	N	Y

MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT

AVERAGE
OBJECTIVES MASTERED

	90 - 91	91 - 92	92 - 93
Grade 6	Y	Y	Y
Grade 4	Y	Y	Y

PERCENT
AT OR ABOVE STATE GOAL

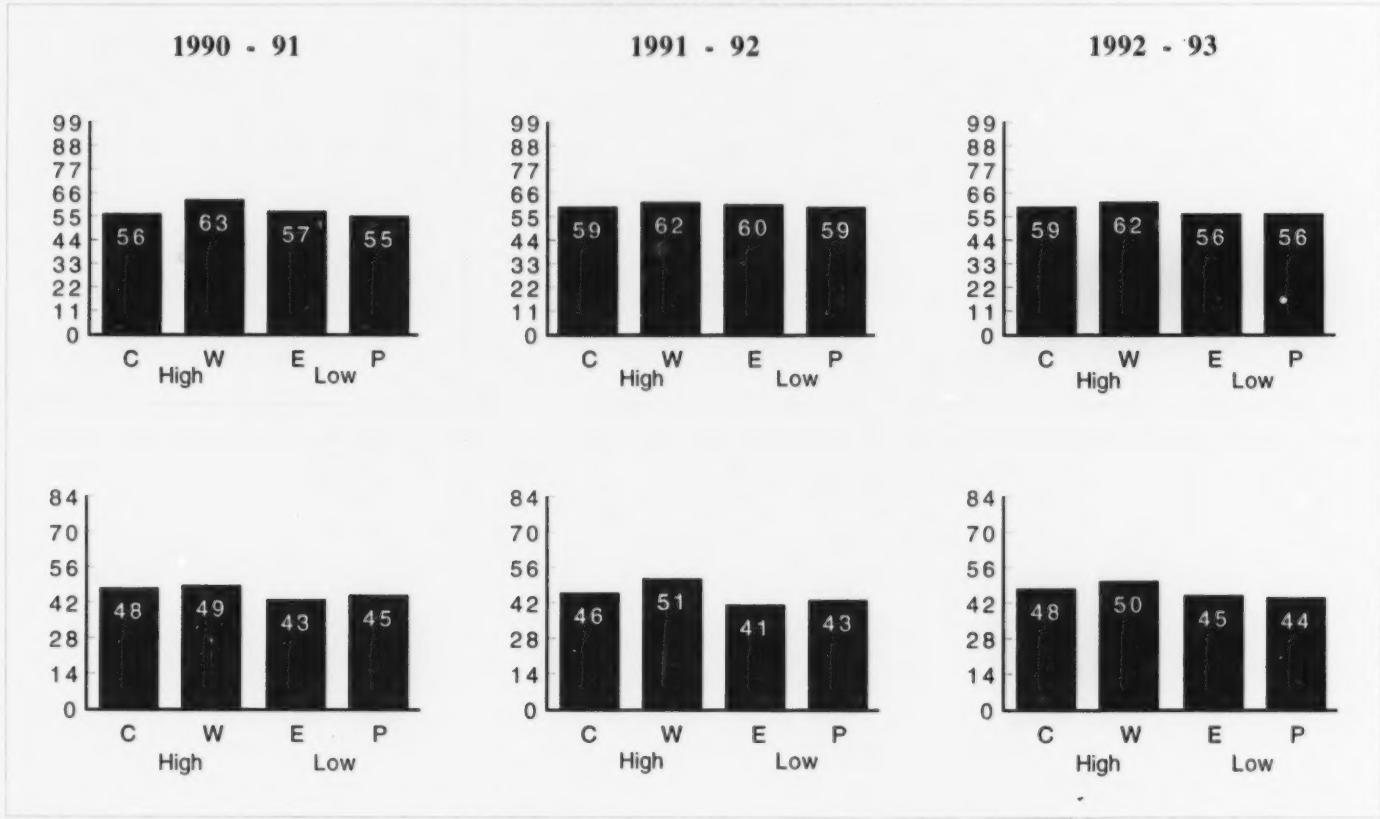
	90 - 91	91 - 92	92 - 93
Grade 6	NA	Y	Y
Grade 4	NA	Y	Y

READING ACHIEVEMENT

PERCENT
AT OR ABOVE REMEDIAL STANDARD

	90 - 91	91 - 92	92 - 93
Grade 6	N	N	Y
Grade 4	Y	Y	Y

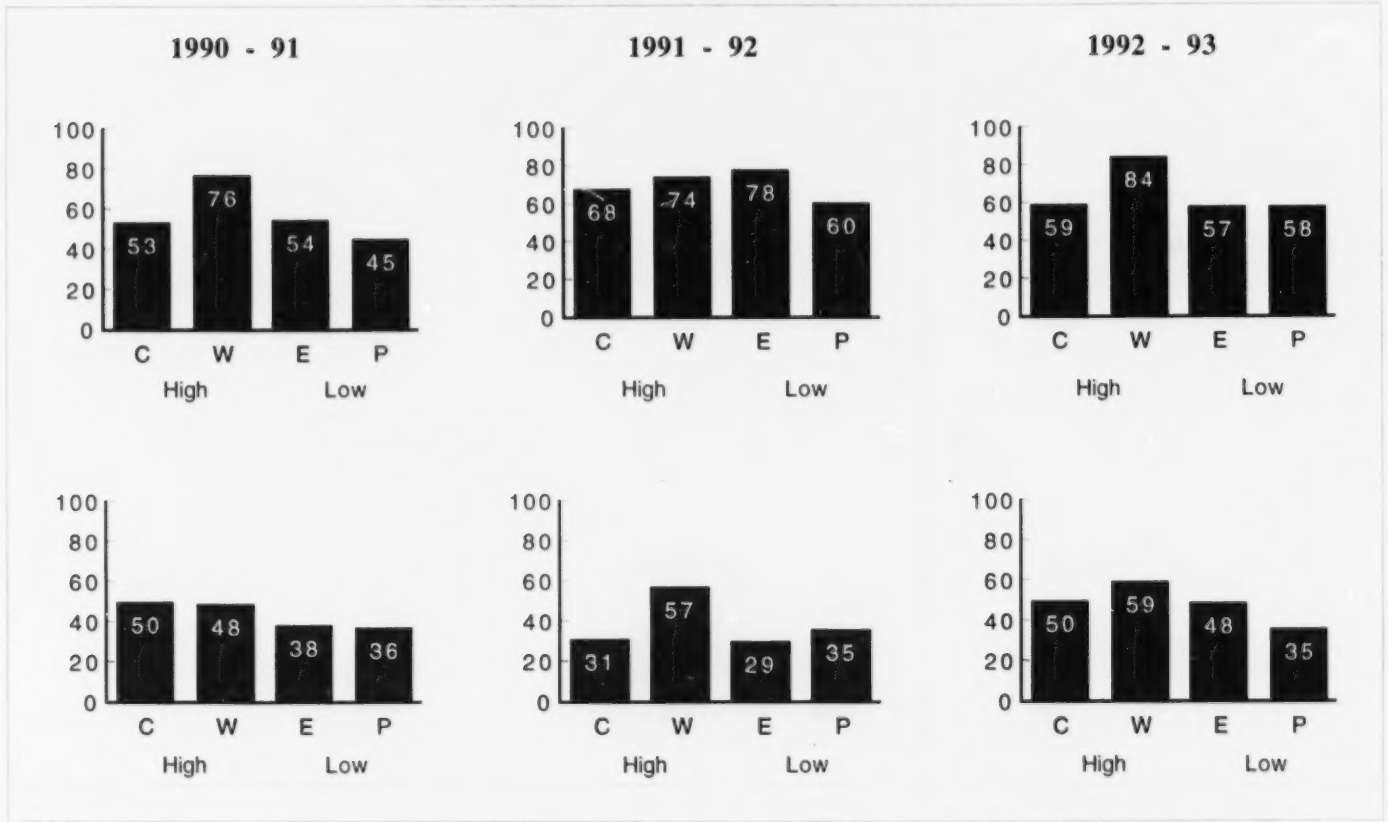
APPENDIX
READING ACHIEVEMENT
AVERAGE DEGREES OF READING POWER



CLAY
WHEATLEY
EMERSON
PALMER

The Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) is a subtest of the Connecticut State Mastery Test. This subtest measures how well students understand the surface meaning of increasingly more difficult textual material. (TASA, 1991, p. 10)

APPENDIX
READING ACHIEVEMENT
PERCENT STUDENTS AT OR ABOVE GOAL



CLAY
WHEATLEY
EMERSON
PALMER

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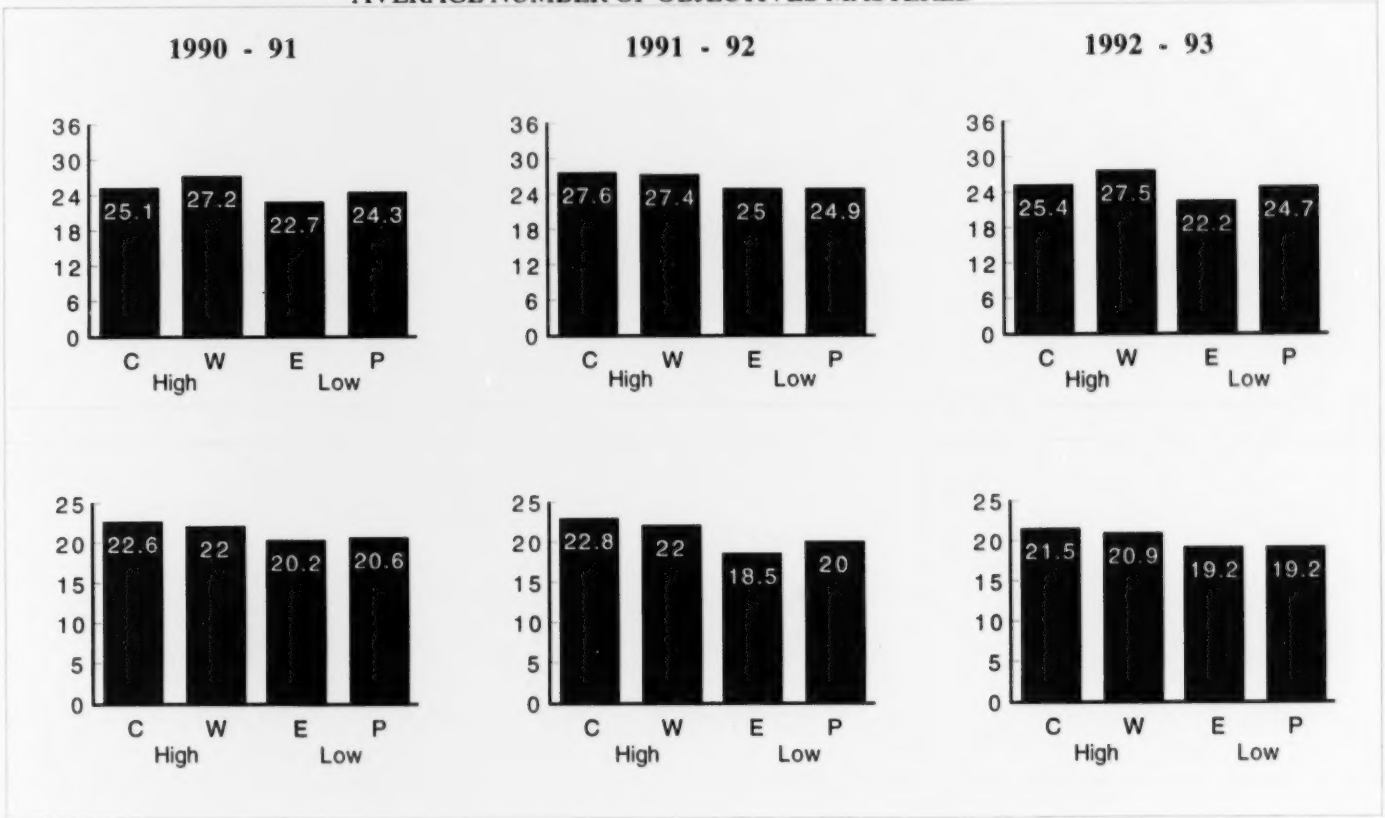
APPENDIX
MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT
AVERAGE NUMBER OF OBJECTIVES MASTERED



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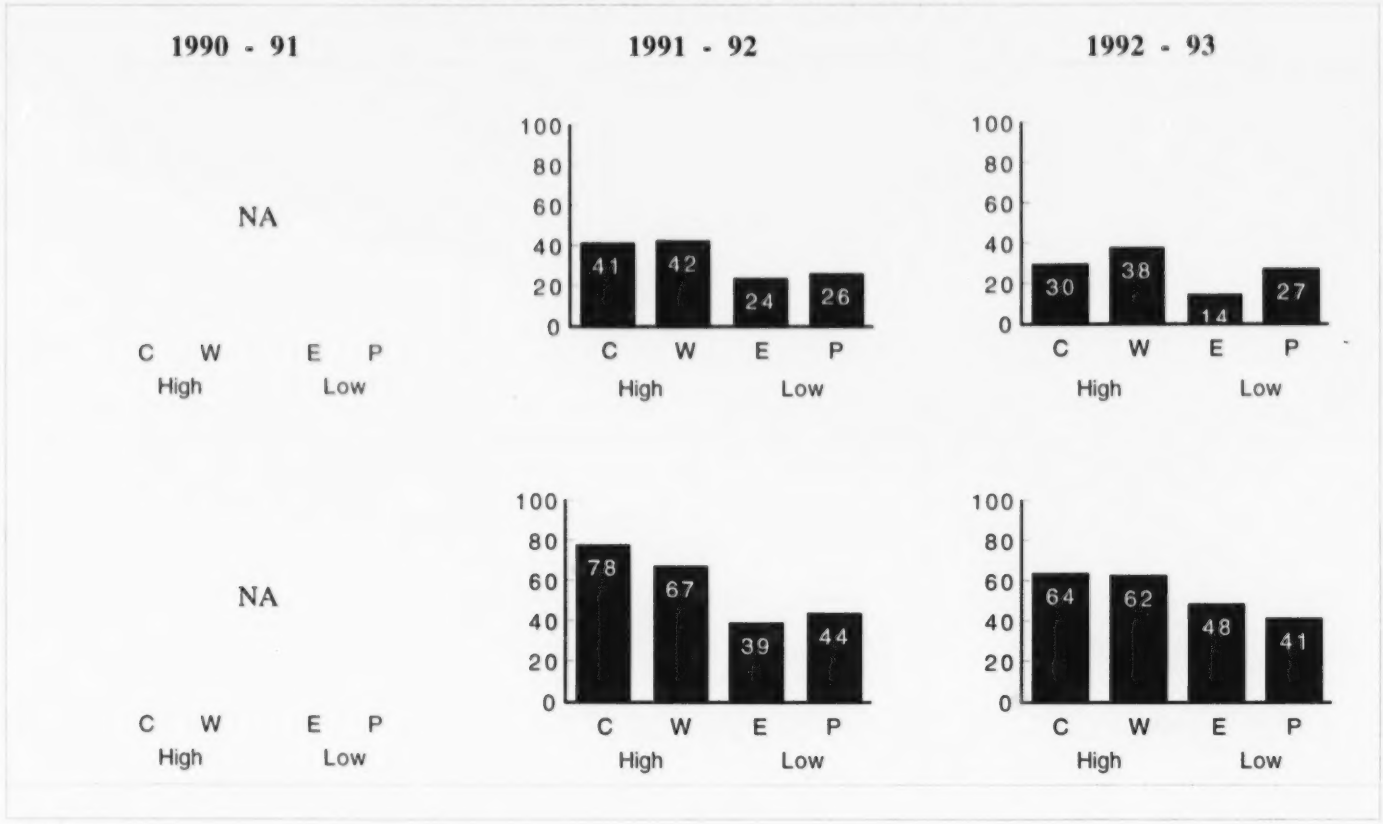
APPENDIX
MATHEMATICS ACHIEVEMENT
PERCENT STUDENTS AT OR ABOVE STATE GOAL



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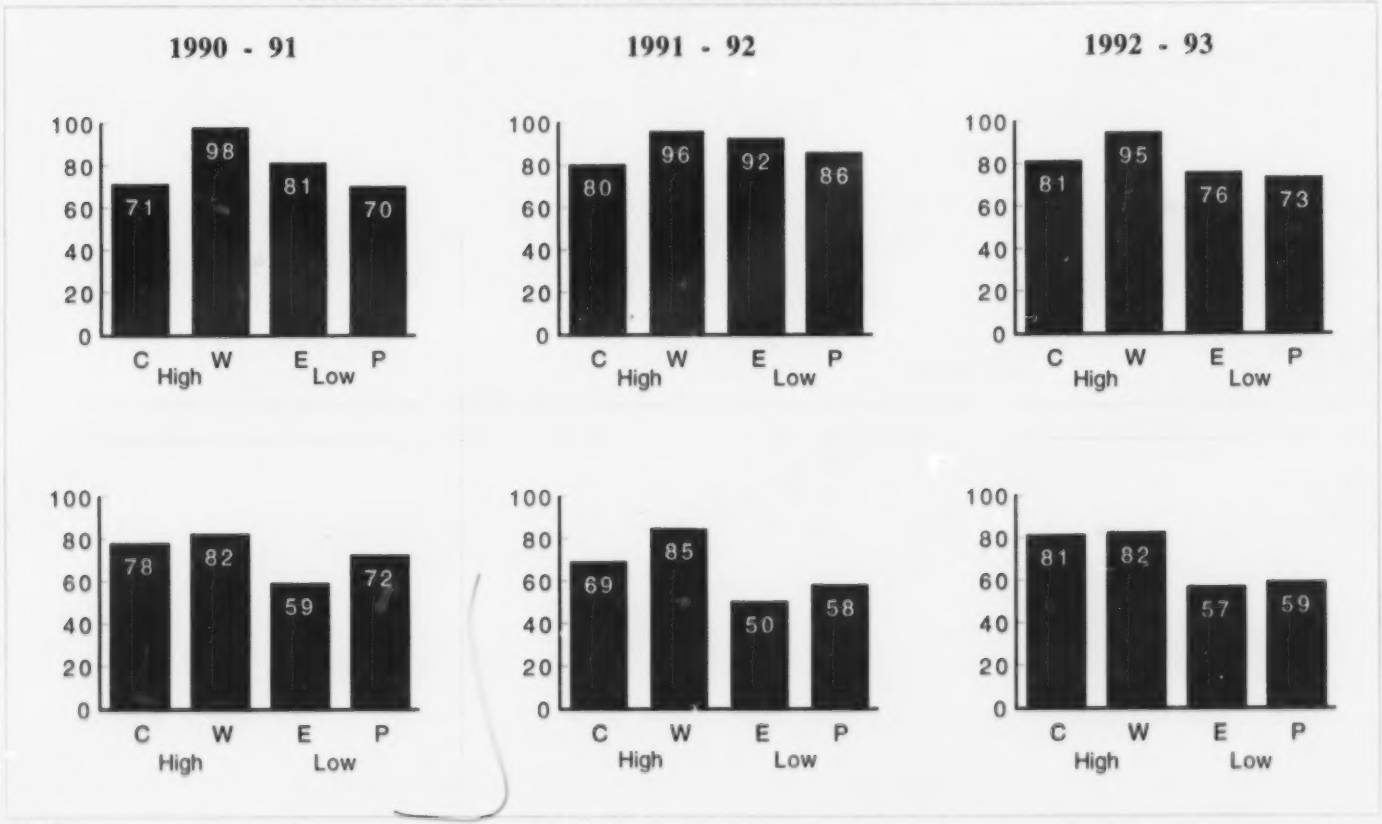
APPENDIX
READING ACHIEVEMENT
PERCENT STUDENTS AT OR ABOVE REMEDIAL STANDARD



CLAY
WHEATLEY
EMERSON
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The Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) is a subtest of the Connecticut State Mastery Test. This subtest measures how well students understand the surface meaning of increasingly more difficult textual material. (TASA, 1991, p. 10)

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